

Review Feature - Understanding Iran: A Summary of Recent Scholarship

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, JUL 11 2013

Navigating Iran: From Carter to Obama
by Ofira Seliktar
Palgrave, 2012

The Shah
by, Abbas Milani
Palgrave, 2011

Israel and the Cold War: Diplomacy, Strategy and the Policy of the Periphery at the United Nations
by, Howard A. Patten
I.B. Tauris, 2013

Understanding Iran is something many academics, policymakers and students are attempting to do today (often in vain). Yet, this endeavour requires a deeper path of scholarship than simply looking at Iran's current composition. The books featured here each approach Iran in a historical context, mainly dealing with pre-revolutionary Iran – ruled by *the Shah* – Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who reigned as Iran's pro-West, and secular (yet autocratic) leader, from 1941 until early 1979.

Navigating Iran: From Carter to Obama, by Ofira Seliktar comes loaded with big statements. This is not just via the title, but also on the back cover where the blurb reads that this is 'the first *full* account' of US-Iran relations from the Carter administration until the Obama administration – and that 'the book discusses *all* major facets of Iranian policy of interest to the US' (emphases mine). Perhaps inevitably, in a book of under 200 pages, those promises are not delivered upon.

Covering such a long period of history (over 30 years) requires care and precision. At certain points in the book these attributes come under question. For example, in the first chapter it is stated that the Shah of Iran sought to make a controversial arms purchase with the US in May **1979**. Granted, not all readers will be US-Iran arms policy experts... but most will know that the Shah had gone into permanent exile in January 1979, and on 1 April the Islamic Republic of Iran had been formed. In reality, the sale the author describes was made in **1977** when the Shah was still at the height of his power. This may be put down to a forgivable typo... yet (sadly) it is not an isolated incident. Such occurrences at the very beginning of the book (chapter one) raise deep concerns over the integrity of the manuscript that are impossible to shake off when reading onwards.

Continuing the unsubstantiated claims in the book, the author promises that the concluding chapter provides 'a systemic analysis of these challenges (in US-Iran policy) at the paradigmatic, policy, and intelligence levels' ... yet that 'chapter' is only *three* pages long, and (inevitably) does not fulfill that promise. In addition, the very short introduction and conclusion sections only make the methodological framework running through the text more difficult for the reader to reconcile.

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To wholly criticize this book is unfair. The attempt to bring 30 years of history into one volume is to be commended. The overall conclusion that the author proffers that Iran seems to habitually negotiate without any intention of reaching a deal (as a purposeful strategy) is a sound analysis, and a worthwhile product of the investigation. Yet, despite any plus points, *Navigating Iran* is a missed opportunity. It has enough to interest a reader with no background in US-Iran policy or an undergraduate student looking for a basic snapshot of US-Iran politics. However, more seasoned readers will find only a summary of secondary literature that lacks a major contribution to current scholarship.

Whereas depth is lacking in *Navigating Iran*, Abbas Milani's *The Shah* has no such problems. Biographies are often major commitments for the reader, sometimes spanning page numbers reaching the high hundreds (and many thousands for the likes of Robert Caro's ongoing biography of Lyndon B. Johnson!). However, in this carefully crafted and excellently written volume, the author has provided a highly readable yet also fairly concise account of the Shah's life, coming in at under 500 pages.

Milani has utilized primary sources and extensive interviews to recreate the Shah's journey from his childhood, right through to his death. In doing so, he takes the reader on a path that weaves through many incidents and areas of intrigue in Iranian diplomatic life. On the whole, the skill that the author demonstrates is masterful. Yet, there are some points in which a more focused reading of the archival record would have prevented the author from repeating some generalisations that build on past literature that is now dated thanks to declassifications and new analyses.

Such an example can be found in the statement that Kennedy's death 'disrupted his (Kennedy's) policies on Iran'. In actuality, by mid-1963 when Kennedy was very much alive, US-Iran policy disagreements over the Shah's political and economic policies that had been raging in Washington since Kennedy's election had been resolved. A policy path was set out that was maintained by Lyndon Johnson. Kennedy had been essentially 'won over' by the peculiar charms of the Shah as other Presidents had (aided by a staunchly pro-Shah State Department).

Yet, such trivialities are not a discredit to the book. The real triumph in Milani's work is the focus on the Iranian domestic arena, not the inner workings of US policymaking with Iran which are better represented elsewhere.

The tendency to avoid a strictly chronological treatment is a notable facet of this book. Whilst there is something of a building momentum from childhood, to throne, to revolution in Iran – the chapters often take detours and jump around in chronology – perhaps following the paths of conversations the author is having with interviewees as they move from one memory to another. At times this does, admittedly, get a little frustrating – however in sum it makes for a refreshing approach to biography that brings the subject to life.

Finally, although not outwardly a book on Iran, a large portion of Howard A. Patten's *Israel and the Cold War: Diplomacy, Strategy and the Policy of the Periphery at the United Nations* deals with Iran-Israel relations. Such an analysis may raise certain assumptions in readers well versed in contemporary Iranian-Israeli politics, which is adversarial to say the least. However, in the pre 1979 era, Israel was one of Iran's closest allies in the Middle East, and vice versa.

The Shah saw Israel as a regional image of the European values he coveted and idealized: democratic, secular (to a degree), and literate. Underwriting all this was the additional point that Israel was (obviously) non Arab, in an era where Arab nationalism was proving unpredictable and aggressive – which played into the fears of the characteristically paranoid Shah. For Israel, the Shah's pro-US disposition proved a common bond, and his public ambitions to become a hegemon in the Gulf (added to his significant military build up in the 1970s) proved a useful check on Arab influence that forged common synergies with Israeli regional policy.

Whilst Israeli relations with the Shah's Iran, and the early years of Khomeini's revolutionary regime comprise a third of the book, Israeli relations with Turkey and Ethiopia form the remainder. Each of the three cases is covered over two dedicated chapters which allows for the sort of detail that is absent in *Navigating Iran* that attempted to cover the US-Iran policies of six administrations within a similar page count. The unifying rationale behind the case studies is found in Israel's 'policy of the periphery' in which it sought to create the impression (at home and abroad) that the

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Middle East was not just Arab, or Islamic – but a region that could be viewed with diversity. This approach sought to deny a narrative where nations such as Egypt claimed to be the centre, or heart, of the region. Instead, it offered a new narrative that incorporated the new state of Israel.

The three case studies in the book are excellently written, and full of insight that will reward readers of all levels. The author has primarily used UN documents to assemble the primary source base, which is an approach that many will find a refreshing shift from the usual diplomatic historian stomping grounds of governmental and personal archives. The richness of the UN source base in this case is found in Israel's high level of diplomacy within the UN through the period analysed, and its pragmatic use of the organisation to further its relations with other nations.

The book is a solid contribution to the literature in an area which has been overlooked in Cold War studies. In addition, as Israeli foreign policy has proved so prominent within the region in recent years – especially with regard to Iran's nuclear programme – the insights offered here provide a grounding in Israeli thinking that will add to the common understanding of politics in the Middle East. The only minor point of criticism would be that the conclusion was much too short, and missed an opportunity to put the case studies into better context.

Other instalments of the Understanding Iran series of book reviews are here and here.

About the author:

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